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## Sense and Sensibility- Multi-volume Reference Sets- Have They a Future?

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# Sense & Sensibility — Multi-volume reference sets - have they a future?

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For the past few years, I've felt bad about the sales representatives from major microform publishers who come to visit hoping to sell microform collections to the library. It seems a cruel thing for a publisher to do - to send a representative out in this day and budget to pitch microfilm to libraries. Libraries admire and praise the products, but in my experience, an actual purchase order is forthcoming less and less often.

While sifting through snail mail, I have recently had unquiet feelings of the same sort about the many glossy brochures for multi-volume reference sets. Are we going to buy these? Is anybody going to buy them? Their publication represents huge multi-year investments of scarce resources and the time and effort of many very talented people - but is this a format that will compete a few years down the road? In print? Electronically? Both? Neither?

Microform collections and multi-volume reference sets would seem to have very little in common. Why am I bracketing them in my mind?

Perhaps because what print multi-volume sets and microform collections have in common is the way we fund them. They compete along much the same decision paths and for much the same pot of money.

Library funding, as far as splitting up the money is concerned, has a certain doomed inevitability to it. First the bill for serials and electronic purchases has to be paid. At the beginning of a given fiscal year, there is almost no way to shrink the size of this year's bill. If you don't have a cancellation list in hand, you are stuck with paying costs as they come in. So that gets done first.

Then you buy some books - especially ap-

proval plan books. Approval plans build a consistency in collection coverage that libraries are loath indeed to fiddle with. Cutting back when funds are tight creates a collection with visible gaps. Users experience difficulties finding materials they have come to expect will be part of the collection. So approval books tend to stay high on the totem pole.

What's left after these core expenses gets divided up to make the allocations for each subject, as well as the allocations to audio-visual materials, rare, documents, maps and so forth. These allocations haven't gone up at my library in some years. Nor have they gone down. But at many libraries they have.

So what happens when we get an announcement of a new multi-volume reference title? It doesn't come on approval, so it misses the obvious route into research collection. The brochures and email go to our subject selectors. They tend to respond favorably. But they frequently balk at paying for such a large purchase on their book allocation. Such a set is likely to make a hole the selector judges unacceptable. Faculty, when asked, tend to be less interested in reference titles than in monographs and journals. And a reference title which is available only in print - meaning a walk to the library - seems to be falling rapidly on their radar. The most frequent destination for a new high-quality reference set request is the wish list.

This is similar to what has been happening with microform sets. Visiting publishers' reps canvas subject selectors and come back to Collection Development to report a high level of interest in certain titles. The literature selector liked this and the history selector was highly complimentary about that. They have promised to be in touch with Collection Development about funding. But, aside from certain

topics which are hot for us - so high priority that we find money no matter what or fields in which we have donor funding set aside or are actively working on building a stronger collection - I seldom hear from any of the selectors because they know that we don't have funding set aside for large discretionary purchases. And they don't want to use up their credibility for emergency requests till they are sure they know what is most urgent for their subject area.

Multi-volume reference sets, at this point, compete better at my library for one-time dollars than do most microform sets. Librarians value these tools highly and put them toward the top of the list of desirable purchases. But a fair part of the time, much in this category goes unfunded.

As reference sets become available online, will they compete better?

Many of them will. But online versions of monographic sets almost always mean the conversion of monographic costs to serials expenditures and libraries are understandably wary of placing subscriptions, however worthy, which they may not be able to support in the future.

And expectations are high. Librarians think in terms of paying for content. If paying every year, they expect new and updated content. They don't give a lot of thought to the ongoing costs for a publisher to maintain an online product. This is ironic, given that libraries suffer on a daily basis from the same problem. Finding the money to pay the infrastructure costs of technology and its staff is probably the number one stress on library budgets, but we don't think much about the same factors in publisher budgets.

Online reference works which make it onto the serials and electronic budget will presumably be judged on use and quality data like other electronic resources. Some will do well - others may not.

But if the acquisitions budget does not go up adequately - and there seems little reason to suppose it will - it will hold fewer titles. Libraries will buy the most critical titles, the ones they can't live without, and probably some of the niche titles for underserved fields, or for fields in which the school has distance ed programs or several campuses. It is difficult to see how collections can offer the breadth of title selection that they did in print. Foreign titles, out-of-print titles, and titles from smaller publishers have suffered in print collections and, as on-going costs for serials escalate, libraries fear they are producing "vanilla" collections which are very similar to each other. The same may well be true for electronic research collections.

## And They Were There from page 81

**Claire Gaudiani**, President of **Connecticut College**, took a rather larger view of the academic library's role in "societal improvement" through its impact on students.

While not billed as such, the capstone of the conference proved to be an invited paper presented by **Michael Ray** early Saturday afternoon. The title fit the conference's western theme: "Shifting Sands - The Jurisdiction of Librarians in Scholarly Communication." Based on **Ray's** dissertation for a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration, the paper had strong theoretical underpinnings from the fields of sociology and organizational development.

In it, he touched on the topics presented in almost every one of the other conference presentations, and brought these pieces together in a comprehensive whole. In his paper, he managed to discuss the librarian's professional role, the impact of technology, collaboration with teaching faculty, relations with university administration, funding, outsourcing, occupational status, library organizational structure, the commercialization of higher education, gender roles, information literacy, **SPARC**, the Web, fair use, digitalization of collections, journal price increases, and more, with conclusions and recommendations for action. Get the published conference proceedings specifically to read this paper. Or go to the Website <http://www.ala.org/acrl/denver.html> for the PDF file.